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“PBSC trains a small army of law students to provide thousands of vulnerable Canadians with vital legal assistance in almost every area of law. There is no other student organization in the world of this size, with this kind of impact on access to justice.



When Pro Bono Students Canada was founded at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law in 1996, it was the first pro bono organization to set up shop in this country.

The growth of PBSC has been staggering. What started as a local program with a few passionate law students and a handful of community partners has expanded, 20 years later, to include 21 law schools in eight provinces in Canada.

Each year the program trains a small army of law students to provide thousands of vulnerable Canadians with vital legal assistance.

And yet, two decades after PBSC was founded, the access to justice crisis remains more dire than ever.

While the poorest among us suffer the most, middle-income Canadians increasingly find themselves shut out of a system that is too expensive, too slow and too complex to navigate.

Family law is often cited as an example of where the system touches many of our lives, and for good reason: divorce is both common (4 in 10 marriages will end) and expensive (the average two-day trial is \$30,000).

According to the Canadian Forum for Civil Justice (CFCJ), every three years fully 12 million Canadians will experience a legal problem.

Despite the urgency of the situation, most Canadians don't give much thought to the justice system. It's only once they bump up against the law in their own lives do people quickly realize how ill-equipped the system is at resolving everyday disputes.

Litigation is stressful at the best of times, and yet half of Canadians try to solve their legal problems on their own. Without a lawyer to guide you through the process, it can be downright harrowing. Research conducted by the National Self-Represented Litigants Project has shown that once their legal issue is finally resolved, some litigants show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

While the problems faced by the justice system are too great to be resolved by any one solution, law students are an incredibly valuable

resource in these efforts. Law schools support a number of initiatives that aim to match talented and motivated students with individuals that need legal assistance, and none has more of an impact than PBSC.

Last year, over 1600 PBSC students filled gaps in the legal system by filling out forms for litigants in family courts, helping low-income taxpayers appeal decisions made by the Canada Revenue Agency, drafting wills and powers of attorney for LGBT and Two-Spirited clients, and assisting homeless people in securing the legal identification they need in order to receive health care and social assistance.

Those students provided over 130,000 hours of free legal services to over 14,000 low-income Canadians. There is no other student organization in the world of this size, with this kind of impact on access to justice.

It is increasingly urgent that the legal profession recognize not only that students can play an important role in meeting legal needs, but that more resources are required for them to do so.

A number of reports, including one commissioned by Canada's top judge, Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, have called for the expansion of student pro bono programs.

Yet last year, PBSC turned away 900 students, for no other reason than lack of capacity to run more placements. That's 65,000 hours of free legal services squandered.

Leveraging the skills and talents of the next generation of lawyers, placing pro bono at the core of the legal profession – these things require more than reports and good intentions, they require resources. And we are confident that initiatives that enlist the help of law students, like PBSC, provide more bang for the buck in the battle for access to justice than any other plausible alternative.

As we mark PBSC's 20th anniversary, let us all come together – governments, the bar, law schools – and commit to making a plan for moving this remarkable and vital organization forward.

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